

Trail by Fire

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are the God who is the living God, the active God, the loving God. We thank you that you are here in our midst, and we pray that we would be alert to what you have to say to us.

By your Holy Spirit, we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Good morning, everyone. Great to be here with you. I was watching TV a while back, and it was a hockey game, and during one of the stoppages in play, the camera panned over into the stands for an interview with a mom and dad. A mom and dad that were hockey parents to not one NHL player playing that day, but two. Two young men on two different teams who happened to be playing each other.

Happened to be playing against each other. And of course, the interviewer wanted to know one thing. Mom and dad, which team are you cheering for today? So what did they say?

Mom, the camera panned out. Mom's wearing a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey. Dad's wearing a Carolina Hurricanes jersey. We cheer for both teams, they said.

[1 : 13] And we cheer that neither one gets hurt, and that they don't get in a fight with each other. Of course, it's a great story, but it's also, if it was you or I, quite confusing and quite ridiculous.

Just as I illustrated with the two hats with the children. Any sane person would look at you and demand, well, which team do you really love? You can't love both.

We're in the middle of a short series exploring the days of Elijah from the book of Kings. An Old Testament prophet in the northern kingdom in the 9th century, B.C.

And during Elijah's lifetime, God's people had turned their backs on Yahweh, the Lord God, and they were worshipping false gods all over the place.

They had adopted a sort of sophisticated religious syncretism. Syncretism is the merging or blending of two different beliefs into something altogether new.

[2 : 19] Religious syncretism. For Israel, it meant blending the worship of Yahweh with the worship of gods like Baal into a sort of spiritual cocktail.

And it was their version of cheering for both sports teams at a game. The thought is, no matter which team wins, I win. If Yahweh is the true God, then we're still his people and we win.

But if this Canaanite god Baal has any power, then hopefully we can get on his good side and benefit from that power as well. Win-win. Now, Baal was the weather god and also a fertility god. So the Canaanites believed he could help you grow your crops, he could help your livestock to thrive, and bless your family with many sons and daughters.

But these so-called blessings from Baal could come at a tremendous cost. A tremendous cost. Just two chapters before our story in 1 Kings 16, we read about the dark underbelly of Baal worship.

[3 : 29] Listen to this. King Ahab erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria, and Ahab made an asherah there. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

In his days, Haal of Bethel built Jericho, the city. He laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram, his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son, Segub.

Child sacrifice. Killing your own sons, hoping that the gods will bless your building project. It's pure evil.

So you can see that the stakes are very high as Elijah is sent by God with a message for King Ahab. In verse 21 of chapter 18, Elijah, he confronts the king and addresses all of Israel with this piercing question.

How long will you go limping between two opinions? Two different options. If the Lord is God, follow him. If Baal, then follow him.

[4 : 40] That's the key question of this passage. You can't keep sitting on the fence because worshipping two gods isn't true worship at all. It's idolatry. It's death.

And this context leads to the dramatic competition between the Lord God and Baal. Between one man, Elijah, and 450 prophets. Well, syncretism is alive and well in the church today.

As those who follow Jesus, Christians are joyful recipients of a powerful new life made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection. If you are in Christ, you belong to the one true God of beauty and tender caring and unfailing love.

There is nothing necessary for your flourishing and happiness that God has not made available to you through his Son. Yet all of us drift towards religious syncretism in one way or another.

Because syncretism is so much more urban and sophisticated than just straight up idolatry, isn't it? All of us are tempted to hedge our bets between two gods, hoping that we can benefit from both sides, afraid the banquet of eternal life might not be enough to satisfy.

[6 : 06] So what does syncretism look like in our world today? Take money as an example. We seek out that promotion at work, even though it means we'll have to work longer hours on Sundays and no longer be able to regularly worship with our church family.

We work those longer days so we can make enough money to max out our RSP and RESP contributions, even though it strains our marriages and we're too tired to lovingly disciple our kids. You know, a national survey a while back asked people, how much more salary would be enough to make you feel really successful? How much more? Surprisingly, the top answer was just 10% more. Not double, not a million dollars more, just striving a little bit more. Just 10% more, and then I can finally settle down and devote my full attention to following Jesus and trusting in God's promises. What about sex and relationships as another example? We attend a church with a reputation for holding biblical teaching on sexuality and gender, yet we look forward to flirting with a workplace colleague who enjoys our sense of humor and stories more than our spouse at home.

[7 : 32] We lay down the law about dating and abstinence when we're talking to our children, our teen children at home, or our loved ones, and yet we secretly watch pornography when no one's around.

This is refined idolatry, religious syncretism in action, compartmentalizing my life so that the Lord Jesus will not intrude or interrupt my own private ambitions and pleasures.

But friends, wisdom shows that greed and lust and all these other false gods just like them can never live up to their false promises.

And we see all the warning signs here in 1 Kings 18. So verses 26 to 29, if you have a look at those verses with me, they describe the actions of the prophets of Baal as they cry out to their God for Him to send fire down on their sacrifice.

Some of you began to chuckle when Elijah mocked them. There is something quite humorous about this story, but not this part. So they took the bowl that was given them and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, Answer us!

[8 : 49] But there was no voice and no one answered. And then continuing in verse 28, they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out upon them.

And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no one answered, no one paid attention. False gods and idols of this world are cruel masters who will not listen when you call.

These idols we corral to serve us and make our life more enjoyable, so-called, they only end up taking our blood and leaving us alone in our circumstances.

It's such a dire picture, isn't it? Yet, yet, there is hope. There is an even greater revelation of God's overflowing mercy and steadfast love in this great story.

So yes, the miracle is amazing. The Lord God wins the trial by fire. He demonstrates unequivocally that He is the one true God by sending fire from heaven to not only just consume the bull, but He wants to show, make a point, I guess, consumes the entire sacrifice, all the water, and the stones, you can imagine a crater in the ground after He's done.

[10 : 10] But, even more amazing still is why He does it. Why He does it. So look at verse 37 with me. Elijah is in the midst of prayer here. And he says, Answer me, O Lord.

Answer me, that this people may know that You, O Lord, are God and that You have turned their hearts back. And that's when the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood

and the stones and the dust and licked up the water in the trench.

And then what do the people do? They respond, falling on their faces, saying, The Lord, He is God. The Lord, He is God. So why does God send fire? Not to win a macho God versus God competition, but rather to turn His people's hearts back to Him.

So this altar, it's very important. It contains 12 stones, 12 representing the 12 tribes of Israel. The fire of God is the judgment of God.

And the judgment of God in this story ought to be falling from heaven onto the people of Israel for their religious idolatry, their religious syncretism. But instead, the fire falls and consumes the sacrifice and spares the people.

[11 : 26] The Lord shows them tender mercy and delivers them from the tyranny of Baal that day. And this is exactly what Jesus Christ has done for you. He has died in your place.

He has taken the fire of judgment upon Himself so that you and I might be cleansed and forgiven. The gospel is the good news of freedom from that bondage to those false gods and sin and Satan. I think our attraction to religious syncretism is understandable. It seems tolerant and nuanced and very modern. But it is incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And this is why our story has to end with that shocking picture, that shocking capture and killing of those 450 prophets. It seems bloodthirsty and cruel.

But syncretism is lethal if it's not addressed. It must be removed completely. And remember one more thing that the narrative here is descriptive, descriptive, not prescriptive.

[12 : 33] So it's describing what happened, not telling you what to do. Brothers and sisters, Jesus tenderly invites us to lay down our doublespeak and our hypocrisy and allow His saving grace to reach into every nook and cranny of our heart and our soul and our mind and our body.

Verse 21 again is the key question for each one of us this morning. How long will you go limping between two different opinions? So come and do that work, Holy Spirit, we pray.

Let me pray for us just before we invite the children to show us our work. Heavenly Father, this is a heavy matter and so we come to you in repentance and faith and ask, Lord, that you would shine the light of your gospel into our hearts.

And we thank you for the community of faith that you've surrounded with us, this family of God that we belong to. We pray that we would be accountable to our brothers and sisters.

We commit this to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.